

TRENDS IN BRIDGEMAT USE & OWNERSHIP

During the same time period that bridgemats became available for loan in the early- to mid-1990's, scrutiny of timber harvesting operations progressively intensified across the country, including North Carolina. Among the many practices more closely evaluated are stream crossings. Studies from across the nation indicate that stream crossings, either on skid-trails or access roads, are the most likely areas in which the potential exists for any water quality degradation to occur as a result of forestry operations (Greis 2002). The use of bridgemats for stream crossings can significantly reduce sedimentation when compared to using pipe culverts, or hard-surface crossings, also known as "fords" (Taylor, et al. 2002).

Evidence indicates that many loggers and forest product companies, with this knowledge in mind, have made significant financial investments in steel bridgemats over recent years. Individual steel panels may cost upwards to \$3,000 apiece. For a large company with several operations ongoing at the same time the investment in steel mats can approach tens-of-thousands of dollars. However, steel material is still favored for mass-quantity purchases since steel lasts longer and is more easily repairable than wood timbers. For these reasons, the DFR is making a transition to steel bridgemats for use in the Loan Program. Wooden bridgemats may still be considered for purchase by the DFR as conditions warrant.



Figures 5a & 5b: New Steel Bridgemats in North Carolina Awaiting Pickup by Customers

From several conversations with individuals in the forestry, logging, and timber community, it appears that purchases of bridgemats have thus far been accomplished by one of three methods, listed here in no order of frequency or significance:

- An individual logging contractor purchases the mats for use with his harvesting operations;
- A forest products company or wood dealer makes the purchase, then provides the mats to the logging contractor who is harvesting timber controlled by that company, and/or;
- A company or wood dealer shares the cost of purchasing mats with a logging contractor.

In addition, these conversations indicate the prevailing drought over this reporting period resulted in lower frequency of bridgemat use by loggers, and reduced production of bridgemats by manufacturers. While this